

West Nile Virus Infection

What is West Nile virus?

West Nile Virus is a flavivirus commonly found in Africa, West Asia, and the Middle East. The virus can infect humans, birds, mosquitoes, horses and some other mammals. West Nile virus (WNV) is a potentially serious illness. Experts believe WNV is established as a seasonal epidemic in North America that flares up in the summer and continues into the fall.

How does West Nile virus spread?

Most often, WNV is spread by the bite of an infected mosquito. In a very small number of cases, WNV also has been spread through blood transfusions, organ transplants, breastfeeding and even during pregnancy from mother to baby. WNV does not spread through casual contact such as touching or kissing a person with the virus.

How soon do infected people get sick?

People typically develop symptoms between 3 and 14 days after they are bitten by the infected mosquito.

What is the risk of getting sick from WNV?

People over 50 are at higher risk to get severe illness. The risk of getting WNV through blood transfusions and organ transplants is very small. The risk that WNV may present to a fetus or an infant infected through breastmilk is still being evaluated.

Do all mosquitoes carry the West Nile Virus?

In the Houston area the Culex mosquito is the common carrier of WNV and St. Louis encephalitis and heart worms in dogs. The Culex mosquito breeds in storm sewers and comes out to feed, preferably on birds, from dusk to dawn. The Culex is a small, less aggressive mosquito whose bite is less obvious than larger pest mosquitoes. The Culex is also known as the Southern House mosquito because it will enter homes through gaps in screens or open doors.

What can I do to prevent WNV?

The best way to avoid WNV is to prevent mosquito bites. When you are outdoors, use insect repellent containing the active ingredient DEET and follow label directions. Do not use DEET on infants. Many mosquitoes are most active at dusk and dawn. Reduce Culex mosquito breeding by ensuring that yard waste does not enter the storm sewer system. Mulch or bag lawn clippings and keep lawn sprinklers on the lawn and off the street. Be sure to use insect repellent and wear long sleeves and pants when outdoors or consider staying indoors. Make sure you have good screens on your windows and doors to keep mosquitoes out.

What should I do if I think I have WNV?

Milder WNV illness improves on its own and people do not necessarily need to seek medical attention for this infection. If you develop symptoms of severe WNV illness, such as unusually severe headaches or confusion, seek medical attention immediately. Severe WNV illness usually requires hospitalization. Pregnant women and nursing mothers are encouraged to talk to their doctor if they develop symptoms that could be WNV.